

Colorado River Storage Project Flaming Gorge Working Group Meeting Minutes March 18, 2021

Participation

This meeting was held Thursday, March 18, 2021 from 10:00 am to 11:40 am. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic, the meeting was held via WebEx virtual meeting only. Attendees are listed below.

Purpose of Meeting

The purpose of these working group meetings is to inform the public and other interested parties of Reclamation's current and future operational plans and to gather information from the public regarding specific resources associated with Flaming Gorge Reservoir and the river corridor below it. In addition, the meetings are used to coordinate activities and exchange information among agencies, water users, and other interested parties concerning the Green River.

General

Dale Hamilton (USBR) called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m., discussed virtual meeting logistics, and introduced the meeting agenda and presenters: Nathaniel Todea, and Scott Chew. To avoid audio feedback, attendees were asked to introduce themselves via the chat function in the virtual meeting (attendees who identified themselves or were identified by their meeting attendee name were included in the list of attendees below). Dale reviewed the four-step process and the primary purpose of this March meeting—to get feedback on the Flaming Gorge operations plan for this year.

Hydrology & Forecasted Flaming Gorge Operations – Nathaniel Todea

Nathaniel Todea, Hydraulic Engineer, U. S. Bureau of Reclamation

Nathaniel presented information on Flaming Gorge and the 2021 forecasted hydrology and operations plan.

The 1956 Colorado River Storage Project authorized construction of Flaming Gorge Dam and other projects for: allowing Upper Basin States to utilize their 1922 Colorado River Compact apportionments, regulating Colorado River (and main tributaries) flow, storing water for beneficial consumptive use, reclamation of arid and semiarid lands, flood control, and hydroelectric power generation.

For operations, the Green River below Flaming Gorge is divided into three reaches: Reach 1 from Flaming Gorge Dam to the Yampa River confluence, Reach 2 from the Yampa River confluence to the White River confluence, and Reach 3 from the White River confluence to the confluence with the Colorado River.

Snowpack above Flaming Gorge is at 94% of median and snowpack in the Yampa and White River basins is at 92% of median (Yampa alone is at 86% of median and 23 days away from the typical median peak snow water equivalent date). The Colorado Basin River Forecast Center forecasts unregulated April-July flow volumes. The March 1st forecast for Flaming Gorge is 555,000 acre-feet which puts Flaming Gorge in the lower end of the Moderately Dry hydrologic classification. The March 1st forecast

for the Yampa River (Maybell plus Lily) is 825,000 acre-feet, which is also Moderately Dry. Forecasts for Flaming Gorge and the Yampa have remained fairly steady this year. The CBRFC also forecasts potential river flows in the Yampa at Deerlodge based on current conditions, with future conditions based on 1981-2015 conditions; the current forecasts indicate that statistically, the Yampa is likely to exceed 6,000 cfs for ~21 days, 8,000 cfs for ~6 days, and likely will not exceed 10,000 cfs.

The Record of Decision calls for adaptive management of operations to maintain or improve conditions for the four endangered fish species while minimizing negative effects to the authorized purposes of the dam. The adaptive management (four-step) process includes the Recovery Program requesting a flow regime, the Flaming Gorge Technical Working Group (FGTWG) proposing operations, the Flaming Gorge Working Group (this group) providing input and comments on the proposed operations, and finalizing the Flaming Gorge Operations Plan. Generally, operations consist of spring releases and ramp down rates timed with the Yampa, base flow ranges, summer temperature targets, release changes, and river stage change limits at the Jensen Gage.

The 2021 Recovery Program request consisted of two scenarios: one for dry or moderately dry conditions and one for average or wetter conditions. Our current hydrology indicates we'll most likely have moderately dry conditions this year which would align with the dry or moderately dry condition request for a smallmouth bass flow spike, Colorado pikeminnow summer base flows, and Muth et al. spring releases (not Larval Trigger Study Plan spring releases). The Flaming Gorge Technical Working Group proposed operations include timing spring releases with the Yampa, likely releasing a one-day peak of 4,600 cfs (no bypass releases) with a 350 cfs per day ramp down at the dam in an attempt to achieve Reach 2 flows of 8,300 cfs for 7 days. After the spring releases and before Colorado pikeminnow releases, there is planned a smallmouth bass flow spike consisting of a one-day ramp up, three days of full power plant capacity (4,600 cfs) releases, and a 2,000 cfs per day ramp down. This smallmouth bass flow spike is anticipated to occur sometime from mid-June to early July. Releases for the Colorado pikeminnow summer base flows are estimated to be about 1,250 cfs, which will likely result in approximately 1,500 cfs in Reach 2, which is lower than the requested flows (but at the higher end of the Muth et al. range). Autumn and winter base flows are estimated to be 850 cfs.

The smallmouth bass flow spike—one-day ramp up, 72-hours at 4,600 cfs, 2,000 cfs/day ramp down—is anticipated to take place during the week (Monday morning to late Friday night) and lower water temperatures by ~4 degrees Celsius which is similar to observed temperature changes.

Responding to questions, Tildon Jones stated that the temperature change may have temporary effects on short-term behavior but is not anticipated to have significant impacts to insects; past releases and weather events have caused similar temperature changes that haven't seemed to produce shifts in native fish species. Responding to a question of whether potential impacts from the flow spike on hydropower could be modeled or studied, Paul Davidson asked that a written request be sent to Paul Davidson, Nathaniel Todea, Chris Cutler and Dale Hamilton. Responding to questions, Ashley Nielson stated that the snowpack is 90% but runoff forecasts are lower partly due to low soil moisture and the fact that the snowpack is worse in the Wind River Range than what is represented by the basin as a whole; she also stated that averages are 1981-2010 and not more current due to the average being updated every 10 years, next year the averages will be from 1991-2020.

If conditions get wetter and we move into average hydrologic condition, the Recovery Program requested operations call for spring releases consistent with the Larval Trigger Study Plan, revised summer baseflows, then smallmouth bass flow spike; however the current operation plan does not include the smallmouth bass flow spike. For the spring peak, bypass would likely be used to meet Reach 2 flow

targets above 18,600 cfs for at least one day, to meet a ROD criteria even though this is not within the ranges of the LTSP request flows. This is described in the FGTWG Proposal.

The current plan for operations is based on moderately dry hydrologic conditions, and includes:

- a spring release timed with the Yampa consisting of a 4,600 cfs one-day peak with a 350 cfs/day ramp down,
- a smallmouth bass flow spike, anticipated to occur mid-June to early July, consisting of a one-day ramp up, a three-day peak at full power plant capacity (4,600 cfs), and a 2,000 cfs/day ramp down
- a Colorado pikeminnow release of 1,250 cfs which would likely result in 1,500 cfs in Reach 2, which is lower than the requested flows but at the high end of Muth et al., and
- autumn and winter base flows of 850 cfs.

The Flaming Gorge Operations plan has tables with likely operations for the various hydrologic conditions/scenarios.

Moving forward, we'll continue to monitor CBRFC forecasts. Current average daily releases are at 860 cfs to achieve the target of less than 6027 feet pool elevation by May 1st. The state is conducting a fishery assessment (electro fishing) April 26-27.

Responding to a question about the potential for the Airborne Snow Observatory (ASO) program in the Upper Green basin, Ashley Nielson mentioned that the CBRFC is considering how they will be able to use the data in forecasting and that as she understands it, it is a stakeholder-driven and funded program. Right now, it isn't clear how significantly the data will improve forecasting.

Responding to a question regarding how much of the reduction to the Pikeminnow base flow request is due to dryness versus water being used for the smallmouth bass spike flow, Nathaniel stated that even without the smallmouth bass flow we would still be short of meeting the requested flow by about 100 cfs.

Responding to a question about how the Utah Governor declaring a state of emergency due to the drought will impact the operations plan, Nathaniel stated that it won't impact planned operations at Flaming Gorge at this time.

Nathaniel mentioned that Lake Powell drought conditions are being monitored and discussions have begun about next steps in case drought contingency plan triggers are hit.

Update on Concurrent Resolution (2021 H.C.R. 001) – Scott Chew

Scott Chew, Utah House of Representatives - District 55

Representative Scott Chew presented information on H.C.R. 001 which recently passed the house and senate and was signed by Gov Cox (<https://le.utah.gov/~2021/bills/hbillenr/HCR001.pdf>).

The 2021 House Concurrent Resolution 001—"Concurrent Resolution Encouraging a Balanced Approach to the Release of Water from Flaming Gorge"—was sponsored by Representative Scott H. Chew, with David P. Hinkins as Senate Sponsor.

As stated in the in H.C.R. 001, "General Description: This concurrent resolution expresses support and recognition of the Green River Stakeholders and the need to reduce the adverse effects of current Flaming Gorge Dam operations to the local communities, recreational businesses, ranchers, farmers, landowners, and individuals who work and live within the river corridor.

“Highlighted Provisions: This Resolution:

- describes the Green River Stakeholders and their concerns associated with the management of the Flaming Gorge Dam;
- describes an alternative method of managing the Flaming Gorge Dam;
- describes the need for investigations and cooperative discussions related to management of the Flaming Gorge Dam; and
- supports the creation of a new management plan.”

Representative Chew expressed that everyone is concerned about releases at Flaming Gorge, and we need to be sure to recognize the unintended but real consequences that have been happening with the high flow releases and try to come up with some solutions to mediate the damage that is being done. The bill passed the house and senate and was signed by Governor Cox, and work is currently on hold primarily due focus being on the COVID response. Representative Chew expressed hope that we can come up with some good solutions.

Dale asked if there were any questions or comments. Tim Gaylord commented that he spoke at both the committee meetings and senate meeting and wanted to reiterate how important it is to keep the transparency that he has seen in this working group, hopefully that can continue. Rep. Chew stated that he intends to keep information as open as possible. Cody Perry expressed thanks to Rep. Chew for responding to their letter and expressed interest in keeping these conversations in this working group so all interested parties can be represented. Jack Lytle expressed thanks to Scott for his work and others for their comments. Dale Hamilton expressed thanks to everyone for their comments and input on operations and noted that Reclamation is required to operate for fish recovery and does adjust operations based on experience and input from stakeholders. The best science we have to date informs and is incorporated into the operations of Flaming Gorge Dam. We use Adaptive Management to adjust operations based on what we have learned in previous years. We’ve been working to be transparent to allow all stakeholders to understand and provide input on Flaming Gorge operations and it is good to hear comments indicating that the process has become more transparent through our efforts. We’ve tried to adjust our operations process to allow more time for stakeholders to provide comments. There are times when we can’t meet stakeholder requests, but it is our intent to incorporate requests where we can. Rep. Chew expressed that stakeholders feel more included and recognized instead of pushed aside and expressed gratitude for that.

Roundtable General Discussion/Q&A

Dale opened the meeting for any discussion, comments, or questions. No additional discussion items, comments, or questions were brought up.

Next Meeting

- Thursday, April 15, 2021 at 10:00 am via WebEx virtual meeting (tentative)
- Thursday, August 12, 2021 at 10:00 am via WebEx virtual meeting (tentative)

Attendees

Steve Craig	Fisherman	John Weisheit	Living Rivers
Woody Bair	Flaming Gorge Resort	Bruce Lavoie	OARS
Cody Perry	Friends of the Yampa	Jordan Nielson	Trout Unlimited
Hattie Johnson	American Whitewater	Brenda Milligan	Sheri Griffith Exp./UGO
Tim Gaylord	Holiday River Expeditions	T. Wright Dickinson	Vermillion Ranch
Matt Lucas	WRF Guides	Kevin Bestgen	Colorado State University

Celeste Maloy	Counsel, Rep. Chris Stewart	Ashley Nielson	NWS (CBRFC)
Scott Chew	State Representative	Aldis Strautins	NWS
Jack Lytle	Daggett Co. Commissioner	Paul Scolari	NPS (Dinosaur NM)
Kirk Robbins	Uintah County MAD	Rob Billerbeck	NPS
Dean Bell	Uintah County MAD	Melissa Trammell	NPS
Justin Needles	Carbon Co. Emerg. Mgr.	Gene Seagle	NPS
Rene Fleming	City of St. George Utah	Jessica Farmer	BLM
Jared Hansen	CUWCD	Kevin Clegg	USFS
Bart Leeflang	CUWCD	Aaron Selig	USFS (Ashley NF)
Todd Adams	Utah DWRe	Chris Watt	USBR
Darrell Gillman	Utah DAF	Dale Hamilton	USBR
Ryan Jones	Utah DAF	Dave Speas	USBR
Chris Keleher	Utah DWR	Ed Warner	USBR
Trina Hendrick	Utah DWR	Gary Henrie	USBR
Matt Breen	Utah DWR	Jared Baxter	USBR
Mike Partlow	Utah DWR	Kathy Callister	USBR
Ryan Mosley	Utah DWR, Dutch John	Keith Babcock	USBR
Mechelle Miller	Utah DEM	Kent Kofford	USBR
Kevin Garlick	UMPA	Mark Delorey	USBR
Mike Squires	UAMPS	Nathaniel Todea	USBR
Leslie James	CREDA	Paul Christensen	USBR
George Weekley	USFWS	Peter Crookston	USBR
Tildon Jones	USFWS	Rick Baxter	USBR
Kevin McAbee	USFWS	Paul Davidson	USBR
Tom Chart	USFWS	Ryan Christianson	USBR
Don Anderson	USFWS	Scott Elliott	USBR
Derek Fryer	WAPA		